

Benton MacKaye Trail - Section 1

Springer Mountain to Three Forks (FS 58)

6.0 miles

General

This is one of the most popular sections of the Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT) because of its proximity to Springer Mountain and the Appalachian Trail (AT). The BMT contacts the AT at four points, making three large ovals with multiple opportunities for loop hikes of a day or half-day. When hiked from south to north, most of the section is rated as "Easiest" with short segments rated as "More Difficult" (moderate) located north of Springer Mountain and north of Crosstrails. It is rated "More Difficult" if hiked north to south. The elevation varies from 3782' on outcropped summit of Springer Mountain to 2550' along rhododendron-lined creeks at Three Forks. This entire area lies within the Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area (originally named Springer Mountain National Recreation Area).

Access

There are three access points to the BMT along this section. Each is via a Forest Service system road that, while unpaved, is passable in all seasons with an automobile.

- Big Stamp Gap: BMT crosses FS 42; 1.7 mi. NE of Springer Mountain.
- Crosstrails: BMT turns 200 feet east of FS 42; 3.2 mi. N along BMT from Springer Mountain.
- Three Forks: BMT and AT cross FS 58 at confluence of Stover, Chester, and Long Creeks.

Directions from East Ellijay, GA: From the intersection of U.S. 76 and the four-lane Appalachian Highway (GA 2, 5, and 515); take GA 2 West for 0.1 mile; after crossing the Cartecay River, turn right on GA 52; 5.3 miles later turn left on Big Creek Road; continue 12.4 miles to Doublehead Gap (church on left); turn right onto the unpaved FS 42; proceed 6.5 miles to Crosstrails. Limited parking is available here. Better parking is 0.2 mile further at the Crosstrails Parking Area for the Appalachian Trail (\$2 parking fee). (Total Distance: 24.3 miles)

OR:

Continue from Crosstrails to reach Big Stamp Gap after 2.0 miles. Parking for about 6 cars is on the right. (Total Distance: 26.3 miles)

OR:

Start from the intersection of U.S. 76 and the Appalachian (GA 2, 5, and 515); take GA 2 West for 0.1 mile; after crossing the Cartecay River, turn right on GA 52; 5.3 miles later turn left on Big Creek Road; continue 12.4 miles to Doublehead Gap; stay on paved Doublehead Gap Road into Fannin County; reach end of pavement after crossing Noontootla Creek; turn right on FS 58 2.8 miles from Doublehead Gap; follow FS 58 for 5.4 miles to Three Forks. Parking is both along the road and off the road at the AT and BMT crossing. (Total Distance: 26.0 miles)

The terminus of the BMT (and the AT) can be reached three ways: from Crosstrails Parking Area 0.9 mi. via the AT, from Big Stamp Gap 1.7 mi. via the BMT, or from Nimblewill Gap 2.2 mi. via the Springer Mountain Approach Trail (from Amicalola Falls State Park).

Shelters, Campsites, and Water

Two AT shelters are within easy reach of the BMT on this section. The Springer Mountain Shelter is 750 feet east of the AT near its junction with the BMT. This is a three-sided shelter with wooden floor and a loft (no bunks) and a spring 250 feet to the south. The Stover Creek Shelter is 0.76 mi. north along the AT from its junction with the BMT on Rich Mountain. This is also a three-sided shelter with wooden floor. Stover Creek Shelter may also be reached by following the AT 1.57 mi. south from Three Forks.

Some good campsites are as follows: near the Springer Mountain AT shelter; Big Stamp Gap, north of road (though near a road); at creek crossing 0.51 mi. NW of Big Stamp Gap; Crosstrails (though near a road); Three Forks (though near a road).

Known year-round water sources are as follows: spring 250 feet south of Springer Mountain Shelter; spring 800 feet SE of Big Stamp Gap; spring 300 feet north of trail at a point 0.1 mi. north of Big Stamp Gap; streams at crossings 0.5, 0.8, and 0.9 mi. west of Big Stamp Gap; spring 300 feet NE of trail at Crosstrails; water from major creeks at Three Forks is not recommended due to heavy camping and road use upstream.

Points of Interest

Springer Mountain (3782'): This is southern terminus of the BMT and the AT as well as being the southern junction of the eastern and western rims of the Blue Ridge. Good views to west are available from rock outcrop at terminus of the AT. The summit area also features a shelter with spring.

Viewpoint near Big Stamp Gap: A rock outcrop on shear southeast slope of ridge provides an excellent view of foothills to south and east. This view is located on a side trail 100 feet from trail at a point 0.4 mi. SW of Big Stamp Gap.

Three Forks (2550'): The confluence of Stover, Chester, and Long Creeks to form Noontootla Creek gives Three Forks its name. FS 58 parallels Noontootla and Chester Creeks while the Appalachian and Benton MacKaye Trails parallel Stover and Long Creeks. The blue-blazed Duncan Ridge National Recreation Trail runs 36 miles from Three Forks to Slaughter Gap, sharing the route of the BMT to Rhodes Mountain (on Section 3). The entire area features a heavy growth of rhododendron as well as large stands of white pine, hemlock, and various hardwoods. Noontootla Creek is an excellent trout stream.

Trail Description - South to North

Mileage	Description
0.0	The BMT begins atop Springer Mountain (3782') at a point 0.2 mi. north of sign and plaque designating terminus of Appalachian Trail. A side trail east to Springer Mountain Shelter departs AT 50 feet south from its junction with BMT. The side trail leads east 750 feet to Springer Mountain Shelter (1992) with a spring 250 feet south of shelter. From the summit of Springer Mountain descend along the northwestern ridge (occupied by AT from 1978 to 1992). Soon pass on left of trail a plaque (1998) dedicated to the memory of Benton MacKaye.
0.2	Begin a broad curve to southeast, leaving ridgeline.
0.4	Join the eastern rim of the Blue Ridge.
0.5	Pass through gap. A timbered area to north allows views of Noontootla Creek basin, "The Bald", and John Dick Mountains. Ascend and skirt south side of Ball Mountain.
0.8	Reach high point. Descend gradually, returning to ridgeline. Continue down east slope of Ball Mountain through a summertime sea of ferns.
1.4	Side trail leads right 100 feet to an overlook from an escarpment that is typical of SE side of Blue Ridge.

Mileage	Description
1.7	Reach Big Stamp Gap (3146') and FS 42, which leads left 26.3 mi. to East Ellijay and right 22.0 mi. to Dahlenega. A good campsite is located in gap at site of former Big Stamp Gap Lean-To (an AT shelter from 1959 to 1975). A good spring is 800 feet to southeast. Cross FS 42 in Big Stamp Gap, leaving eastern rim of the Blue Ridge, and descend, soon turning left into a cove. At this point, a spring is 300 feet to right. Continue into cove; make sharp right turn, uphill.
1.9	Switchback left onto flat ridge.
2.0	Intersect old woods road and follow it to right, downhill. Pass within sight of a wildlife opening (no camping) on left. Continue downhill.
2.2	Cross the creek. A good campsite is on right, across creek. Follow old road to left, uphill.
2.5	Reach high point. Descend.
2.6	Headwaters of Davis Creek. Ascend to right, reaching high point, and descend.
2.7	Cross the creek. Again, ascend to right to reach ridgeline, then turn left, continuing on woods road along ridgeline with a timbered area on right. The clearing allows views to north and east of Noontootla Creek basin, "The Bald", and Blue Ridge.
3.0	Turn left off old road and cross the Appalachian Trail. AT leads south (left) 0.3 mi. to a parking area at its junction with FS 42, and 1.3 mi. to Springer Mountain. Just beyond intersection, enter another old road. Continue along level road.
3.2	Reach Crosstrails (3300'), site of former Crosstrails Shelter. To right of trail is a side trail that leads 300 feet to a spring. Straight-ahead 200 feet, old road intersects FS 42. To left on FS 42, Dahlenega is 24.2 mi.; to right, East Ellijay is 24.1 mi. Turn right at Crosstrails and follow BMT to north. Descend briefly before making a moderately steep ascent of Rich Mountain.
3.4	Begin more moderate ascent and follow ridgeline.
3.6	Cross high point (3450').
3.9	Pass through saddle in ridge (3300') and cross AT. Left on AT lead to Stover Creek Shelter. Right on AT leads back to Crosstrails Parking Area. BMT continues straight ahead. Ascend slightly.
4.1	Reach high point (3360'). Begin a long, gradual descent along ridgeline through a dense hardwood forest.
4.7	Swing to left of ridgeline, then circle right around northern point of ridge.
5.0	Enter an old woods road. Continue, at first level, then downhill along road.
5.3	Turn sharp right and descend. Circle first to right and then to the left.
5.5	Intersect old woods road. Turn left and pass through a small cove with an intermittent spring to left.
5.9	Intersect AT. Turn right along AT/BMT, reaching bridge across Chester Creek after short descent.
6.0	Reach Three Forks (2550') and FS 58, which leads left 26.0 mi. to East Ellijay and right 23.6 mi. to Dahlenega. Good campsites exist along all creeks in this area.

Trail Description - North to South

Mileage	Description
0.0	From FS 58 in Three Forks (2550'), follow BMT/AT to SW. (Good campsites can be found on all creeks in this area.) In 100 feet, cross bridge over Chester Creek, bear left, and ascend gradually.
0.1	Turn left to leave AT. Ascend gradually along old roadbed, circling into cove with intermittent spring on right.
0.5	Take right fork, uphill. Circle first to right and then to the left.
0.7	Intersect old woods road. Turn left. Ascend along road and reach level area.

Mileage	Description
0.9	Swing to right of road and circle left around northern point of ridge.
1.2	Attain ridgeline and continue a long, gradual ascent along ridgeline.
1.9	Reach a high point (3360').
2.1	Cross AT in a saddle in ridge (3300'). Left on AT leads to Crosstrails Parking Area. Right on AT leads to Stover Creek Shelter. Continue straight ahead on BMT and ascend.
2.4	Reach high point of Rich Mountain (3450').
2.5	Swing left, leaving ridgeline, and descend more steeply. Ascend briefly.
2.7	Reach Crosstrails (3300'). To right, old road leads 200 feet to FS 42. FS 42 leads left 24.2 mi. to Dahlenega; right 24.1 mi. to East Ellijay. Turn left on BMT and follow an old road. To right, 100 feet from turn, is a campsite, site of former Crosstrails Shelter. Opposite, to left of old road, a side trail leads 300 feet to a spring. Follow old road along a level grade.
3.0	Turn right off road, and cross AT. To right, AT leads 0.3 mi. to the Crosstrails Parking Area at FS 42 and 1.3 mi. to Springer Mountain. Continue straight ahead and enter another old road in less than 100 feet. Descend along ridgeline past timbered area on left. The Noontootla Creek basin, "The Bald", and the Blue Ridge are all visible to north and east. Circle right along the road.
3.3	Cross the creek. Circle left, uphill. Cross point of ridge at and circle right, downhill.
3.4	Cross headwaters of Davis Creek. Ascend.
3.5	Reach high point. Continue on old road.
3.7	Cross the creek. Campsite is to the left of trail just before creek.
3.9	Pass within sight of a wildlife opening (no camping) to right of trail and turn left, leaving old road. Follow ridgeline.
4.0	Switchback to right. After a short descent, turn left into a cove. Here, a spring is 300 feet to left of trail. Turn right and ascend briefly.
4.2	Reach Big Stamp Gap (3146') and FS 42, which leads to the left 22.0 mi. to Dahlenega and right 26.3 mi. to East Ellijay. Cross the road and turn right (SW) along the Blue Ridge, route of AT from 1934 to 1979. There is a campsite in Big Stamp Gap to east of trail and south of road. The nearest water is a spring 800 feet to southeast. Beyond FS 42 in Big Stamp Gap parallel road for a short distance, ascending gradually along ridgeline.
4.6	A side trail leads to the left 100 feet to an outstanding overlook of upper Piedmont. Continue ascending.
5.1	Reach a high point on south slope of Ball Mountain. Descend briefly.
5.4	Pass through the gap, and then ascend along ridgeline.
5.6	Leave ridgeline to head northwesterly.
5.8	Begin curve to south, following northwest ridge occupied by AT from 1978 to 1992. Soon pass on left of trail a plaque (1998) dedicated to the memory of Benton MacKaye.
6.0	Reach terminus of BMT on Springer Mountain (3782'), and the intersection with the AT. A side trail to Springer Mountain Shelter (1992) and spring intersects AT 50 feet south of terminus of BMT. The shelter is 750 feet east via side trail; spring is 250 feet south of shelter. The southern terminus of the AT is 0.23 mi. south of this point at a rock outcrop, which affords fine views of the Blue Ridge. Here is a plaque marking the terminus of the AT. From here the Springer Mountain Approach Trail continues south 8.3 mi. to Amicalola Falls State Park Visitor Center. The AT leads north 0.7 mi. from BMT/AT junction to FS 42 and a parking area near Crosstrails.